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Critical Literacies and Graphic Novels for English-Language Learners: Teaching *Maus*

Using graphic novels in the classroom can help explain how language works both for and against people and enable students to acquire an appreciation for critical literacy.

Christian W. Chun

Teaching with graphic novels is one alternative to traditional literacy pedagogy, which has ignored the dynamic relationships of visual images to the written word (New London Group, 1996). There has been increasing interest in graphic novels to promote literacy (e.g., Gorman, 2003; Schwarz, 2002); however, there is scant mention of how several of these multimodal texts can be used for both fostering students' critical literacies and addressing the needs of the many English-language learners (ELLs) present in today's classroom. Intellectually substantive graphic novels such as *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1986, 1991) and *Persepolis* (see Table 1 for other graphic novels mentioned in this text) that foreground racism and immigrant otherness resonate with ELL students. These texts' multimodalities along with their engaging content reflecting the diverse identities present in many classrooms work in tandem to help deepen the students' reading engagement and develop their critical literacies. For ELL students, their increased engagement can facilitate their entry and apprenticeship into important social networks that amplify opportunities for academic success in mainstream classes.

My aim is threefold: In making a case for incorporating and expanding a pedagogy of multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996) in classrooms, many of which now have ELL students, I advocate the use of graphic novels to aid language pedagogy and learning as one way of implementing a multiliteracies approach that deepens reading engagement. I then present one such graphic novel, *Maus*, as a possible teaching resource that can facilitate critical literacies by using a "critical literacy tool-kit" (Morgan & Ramanathan, 2005) in the secondary school classroom. Reporting on a collaborative pilot study of teaching *Maus* in an English as a Second Language (ESL) high school class, I conclude by examining how graphic novels can be used to develop and draw on students' multiliteracies practices.

Table 1 Examples of Intellectually Substantive Graphic Novels

| Title | Author | Copyright | Publisher |
|---|-------------------|-----------|---------------|
| <i>Alia's Mission: Saving the Books of Iraq</i> | Mark Alan Stamaty | 2004 | Knopf |
| <i>Barefoot Gen</i> | Keiji Nakazawa | 1995 | Penguin |
| <i>The Complete Persepolis</i> | Marjane Satrapi | 2007 | Knopf |
| <i>Palestine</i> | Joe Sacco | 2001 | Fantagraphics |
| <i>Safe Area Gorazde: The War in Eastern Bosnia 1992–1995</i> | Joe Sacco | 2000 | Fantagraphics |

Reading Engagement and Multiliteracies

The PISA 2000 report (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2004) that surveyed 15-year-olds in 43 countries found that students' levels of reading engagement were more important than their socioeconomic backgrounds in predicting their literacy performance. The implication of this is all too clear—"cultivating a student's interest in reading can help overcome home disadvantages" (OECD, 2004, p. 8). In classrooms that have students who come from marginalized communities and have little access to resources that enable mainstream middle class students to succeed academically, this cultivation of interest in reading can help level the playing field. Furthermore, these students' engagement in reading enables them to apprentice into social groups and networks in both the classroom and community, routes that might have otherwise been closed (Gee, 2008; Guthrie, 2004).

In contrast to the assumption that reading is solely an isolated activity, Guthrie (2004) argued that engaged reading is "often socially interactive" (p. 4). These interactions are clearly evident in the reading club, chat room, blog, and posting activities that have flourished in the wake of recent phenomenally popular books among adolescent and adult readers. Engaged reading followed by participation in these activities and others is a key to proficiency. In what Guthrie termed a spiraled process, reading engagement and achievement are mutually reinforcing, and intertwined in this spiral are students' senses of their identities as they increasingly see themselves as "read-

ers who are learners and thinkers" in which literacy is internalized "as a part of who they are" (p. 6).

One approach that fosters reading engagement involves a pedagogy of multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996) with its four-dimensional instructional framework: (1) situated practice, which draws in part from students' own life experiences; (2) overt instruction that introduces metalanguages to deconstruct the myriad and multimodal ways in which meaning is constructed; (3) critical framing of the cultural and social context in which meaning is disseminated and understood; and (4) transformed practice that aims to re-situate all of these meaning-making practices to other cultural sites or contexts. Multiliteracies is defined as "the multiplicity of communication channels and media" and "the increasing salience of cultural and linguistic diversity" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 5). Inasmuch as many students are already engaged in multimodal practices of meaning making (online role-playing games, text messaging, etc.), a pedagogy of multiliteracies seeks to incorporate these important resources to construct knowledge in linguistically diverse classrooms. By foregrounding in the classroom substantive topics that can be related to students' own experiences, multiliteracies pedagogy works to promote learning that recognizes students' own knowledge resources, which in turn affirms students' identities as learners and thinkers.

Because meaning making has become increasingly multimodal, our definition of literacy needs to encompass not only the textual, but also the visual, the spatial, and the aural. The PISA 2000 report (OECD, 2004) highlighted that a key indicator of reading engagement and achievement among the

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15-year-olds surveyed is the diversity of their reading content. Given the increasingly complex delivery systems of information in our globalized societies, it follows that the more students are exposed to and grounded in multiple modes of representation, the more they would appear to have a chance to succeed in school and beyond. One such multimodal text that is engaging to students is the graphic novel.

Graphic Novels and Critical Literacy

Although the term *graphic novel* itself is disputed (e.g., Hatfield, 2005; Wolk, 2007), here I adopt Gorman's (2003) definition of a graphic novel, which is "an original book-length story, either fiction or nonfiction, published in comic book style...or a collection of stories that have been published previously as individual comic books" (p. xii). I am concerned here with original book-length stories in graphic novels, allowing creators interested in mature themes to present longer complex narratives, which is not possible with the much shorter format of the comic book (Brown, 2004, as cited in Gravett, 2005). Although Gorman suggested that graphic novels "can be considered a reading intermediary from the computer or television screen to the printed page" (p. 9), I prefer to see them as part of a literacy continuum of multimodal resources with which students need to be conversant in today's world.

In the past 25 years or so, the graphic novel medium has been coming into its own (Gravett, 2005). This medium has to be considered as "not the visual equivalent of prose narrative or a static version of a film," but rather "their own thing: a medium with its own devices, its own innovators" (Wolk, 2007, p. 14). As such, as both narrative and cultural production, the medium of the graphic novel warrants our careful attention and critical analysis (Witek, 1989). Indeed, when the graphic novel *Maus* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1992, the medium was legitimized and validated in ways that were heretofore unimaginable.

Using graphic novels in the classroom contextualizes the featured language in ways that aid ELL students in learning how to use the language, or at least parts of it, correctly (Hornberger & Skilton-Sylvester, 2000). As Krashen (1989) pointed out, the visual narrative that accompanies the text in comic books "can provide clues that shed light on the meaning of an unfamiliar word or grammatical structure" (p. 402). Several graphic novels with substantive content are accessible to even high-intermediate ELL students—such as *Alia's Mission*—and thus can enable them to engage in critical discussions in ways that are not always possible with only written texts, due to their scaffolding of textual meanings through their rich visual modes of representation. ELL students often face formidable barriers in a written text without any accompanying visual context. In the context of teaching comic books, researcher Patricia Duff observed that "students noted that the colorful pictures, contextualized vocabulary and interesting content provided a compelling hook into reading" (cited in Norton & Vanderheyden, 2004, p. 217).

In addition, certain graphic novels can be a helpful resource for teachers who are always looking to find additional reading material that is both comprehensible and appealing for older learners (Cho, Choi, & Krashen, 2005). And rather than seeing graphic novels as a conduit to more serious reading (Cho et al., 2005), students who read *Maus* and other substantive graphic novels *are* engaged in serious reading. Thus, the teaching of critical literacy can take place while students develop literacy skills through their engagement with these texts so that they will be better equipped to deal with more traditional texts.

Graphic novels like *Maus*, *Barefoot Gen*, and *Persepolis*, about seminal events in the not-so-distant past, can mediate these historical realities with their unique visual narrative styles that allow many readers, especially adolescent ones, to imagine and interpret characters' experiences that are far removed from their own daily lives. For example, adolescent readers are able to better understand the horrors of the Holocaust through the complex humanity of the main characters in *Maus*, partly because of the artist's representation of his father and other Jews as comic book mice. This stylization enabled the artist to

create an authentic narrative about an unimaginable genocide because the complex visual metaphors in this graphic novel act as a defamiliarizing device so that readers can understand this historical event in intimate and offhand ways (Hatfield, 2005; Witek, 1989). This phenomenon has important implications for students' engagement with reading graphic novels with complex themes because reader "ownership over meaning making is clearly one of the appealing facets of comic book reading" (Norton & Vanderheyden, 2004, p. 211).

Teachers can help develop students' faculties in critical analysis by asking students several key questions, such as those that Wallace (2001) raised: "Why has this text been written? What is the topic of this text? Who is this text addressed to?" (Kress, 1985, adapted and cited by Wallace, p. 220). Students' answers might include comic book readers, historians, and the general public, all of which would demonstrate the potential to understand the complex ways in which readers and reading are positioned in the social relations of meaning production. An understanding of the reasons why texts are written for specific readerships and how they achieve their purposes in conveying particular messages is at the heart of critical literacy.

Within the context of an ESL classroom, critical literacy is an important element in a student's journey toward acquiring the academic literacy necessary for success in school (Cummins, 2001). Graphic novels like *Barefoot Gen*, *Palestine*, *Safe Area Gorazde*, and *Persepolis*, which feature complex themes on war and its atrocities, current political realities, and coming-of-age in a time of revolution, can be part of what Benesch (1993) called "a critical ESL curriculum" (p. 714). Cross-modal critical analysis can then occur; for example, students can compare these graphic novel perspectives on historical realities with other views presented by film documentaries, Wikipedia entries, and textbooks. Teaching *Maus* in the secondary school classroom can employ a critical multiliteracies approach that can affirm students' identities as thinkers and learners.

Maus in the ESL Classroom

Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (1986) is a graphic novel that tells many stories: those of a difficult relationship between father and son, a son's painful remembrance of his mother's legacy, and the courtship and travails of his parents, all of which are overshadowed by the living past of the Holocaust that haunts the survivors and their children. The narrative continually shifts between the present and the past as the father, Vladek Spiegelman, recounts to his son, Artie (who is planning to write about his family's history) his life in pre-war Poland and his struggles with his wife to survive the ensuing destruction by the Nazis. It is Vladek's effort in surviving this destruction of his family and people, and his subsequent testimony of crimes against humanity, that gives *Maus* its poignancy. The nightmarish horrors of the concentration camps and the war are rendered by the representations of the Nazis as predatory cats and the Jews as mice.

What makes the use of *Maus* in the classroom so compelling is its intellectually engaging content realized through its visual narrative strategies of representing history. It achieves the status of literature with the complexity of its theme, the subtlety of its characterizations, the visual metaphors expressed through its compositions, and its seriousness of purpose. History for many students is often a boring exercise in the classroom primarily due to many standardized and sanitized textbooks that strip away the interesting dramas and contradictions that constitute our histories (Loewen, 1995). As a result, these textbooks tend to discourage critical reflection and thinking in their presentation. In contrast, a graphic novel like *Maus* can engage students' attention and activate their imagination through the author's use of multimodalities in presenting visually arresting narratives that feature the multilayered emotions and contradictions of the characters. The "communicative vehicle" (Morgan & Ramanathan, 2005) of this graphic novel and others like it can shape how students understand and retain important historical legacies and their meanings in ways history textbooks often do not.

Because *Maus* directly addresses the issue of racism and its pernicious, deadly consequences, it is an ideal text to use in classrooms with ELL students as

they often face the daily discourses and practices of racism that permeate the society in which they find themselves. The contradictions surrounding Vladek Spiegelman's experiences of the genocidal practices of Nazism and his own racist attitudes displayed 30 years after the Holocaust, which are deftly portrayed in *Maus*, are some of the many starting points teachers can use in constructing a class lesson on this subject. This would also serve as a bridge to elicit students' reactions and responses to recent public discourses of racism in the western world; particularly certain countries in Europe and the United States in which expressions of negative attitudes toward immigrants, anti-Muslim sentiments, and the scapegoating of minorities for society's alleged ills are prominently articulated in public discourses.

After the appropriate scaffolding of historical contexts, one way to critically interact with this text is to ask students how the Holocaust could happen in a country that had a democracy less than a decade before. The readings can provide an initial point of departure to question and examine the historical process by which the Nazi regime was established through the democratic apparatus of Weimar Germany. This examination and excavation of history in the classroom can raise the issue with students that if this happened in a democracy before, can it happen again, either in North America or Europe? Once students are made aware of the historical context of another country, it is a short step to point out the present day context in several countries in which certain immigrants have been characterized in racist terms and blamed for a host of problems, a practice of which many ELL students might be all too cognizant. The detailed presentation in Spiegelman's *Maus* of how the Nazis dehumanized the Jews first through language is instructive of how people can use the violence of language to create a reality of violence. As Morrison (1994) argued, "oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence" (p. 16), a practice which is all too familiar in schools. Teaching how language works can result in critical language awareness, which is crucial in a democratic society.

A Critical Tool Kit in Action

Morgan and Ramanathan (2005) presented four points that constituted an "abbreviated sense of a critical literacy 'tool-kit' in action" (p. 156). A teacher can teach *Maus* using this critical tool kit in the classroom. The first point is the "use of narratives/autobiographies to link personal experiences with sociohistorical and institutional power relations" (p. 156). One question that a teacher can ask while teaching *Maus* is: Do some of the experiences of Vladek Spiegelman resonate with ELL students' senses of themselves? If so, how and in what ways? Because his story is told in a dialogic form with his son, students can understand history's impact on a personal level. The story of Vladek's struggle to carry on despite the devastating historical forces that have destroyed an entire way of life can be a powerful model of discourse for immigrant students who may have experienced similar traumas. This text can act as a springboard to examining how racism is institutionalized in North America and Europe, which students cannot fail to notice and by which they might be possibly affected in their daily existence. Students can begin their own written autobiographies that contextualize their life stories in the societies and institutions in which they were raised. Using *Maus* as a possible model, they can narrate their stories in a dialogue with a friend, family member, classmate, or teacher. Their own stories can use their first language—just as Vladek Spiegelman switches among the several languages at his disposal—to help re-create the world they left behind in all its specificity. Having a powerful example before them of an ordinary person who lives to tell the tale will affirm students' finding their own voices to tell their life stories that need to be told and heard in the classroom and beyond.

The second point is that by juxtaposing texts "in ways that question and subvert received disciplinary knowledge" (Morgan & Ramanathan, 2005, p. 157), teachers can problematize issues and discourses that may not always be foregrounded in the classroom. Because racism and, in this instance, the perpetual insistent denial of the Holocaust (witness the 2006 conference in Iran; Fathi, 2006), are ongoing cancers in our societies, teacher talk can mediate students' receptions and reactions toward racial profiling and stereotyping that proliferate in schools everywhere. Teacher

talk also facilitates discussions that “talk through” the text of *Maus* so that students can feel free to display their own capability in producing multiple interpretations. Multiple readings will enable students to challenge the information they will inevitably encounter in other media. Instead of reading (or attempting to read) official presentations of history with passive acceptance or indifference, students’ intellects and imaginations are challenged and activated by contact with multimodal texts that present alternative representations of history.

It is this encouragement to critically engage with and reflect on the politics of historical representations that make up the third point in this critical tool kit. Through exposure to texts like *Maus*, students can be made aware that although Vladek Spiegelman’s horrific experiences were specific in a concrete historical context, genocide is not confined to the past, as the current situation in Darfur, Sudan, unfortunately demonstrates. After their reading of *Maus*, students could move on to other graphic novels such as *Barefoot Gen* and *Persepolis* as additional texts to reflect on the issues of militarism, revolution, and human rights. In this way, students’ own prejudices can be questioned and examined through engagement with these representations of otherness along with the consequences of our own complicity in reinforcing them. The discussions and reflection that these texts can generate help students to examine the racist practices that shape their own school environment (Corson, 2002).

In their final point, Morgan and Ramanathan’s (2005) advocacy of the use of multimodal and semiotic strategies in their critical literacy tool kit can be implemented in the classroom with the multimodal text of *Maus*. In its multiplicity of discourses, *Maus* is an ideal model for literacy learning and teaching as conceptualized in the multiliteracies framework in two salient aspects. First, in many classrooms in North America and Europe that are increasingly characterized by a linguistic and cultural diversity that reflects unprecedented global migration, the affirmative teaching of texts that feature characters who are multilingual and who use this ability to survive and negotiate their way in a dangerous world will certainly acknowledge the identities of multilingual students who find themselves in institutions that often

promote monolingualism. Vladek Spiegelman, who speaks Polish, Yiddish, English, German, and Swedish, survives in large part due to his ability to employ his linguistic resources in a variety of situations. In one scene at the Auschwitz concentration camp, he teaches his Polish guard English in exchange for better clothes and food, which help him and his friend to survive the daily brutality.

But it is not only his command of languages that aids him in critical times, it is also Vladek’s knowledge of how to use various discourses in specific situations, or what Gee (2008) called the “Discourses” with a capital *D*. Vladek knows how to use different talk with Nazi officers, Polish guards, and potentially treacherous countrymen. This is brilliantly illustrated by Spiegelman’s use of various characters wearing the masks of other animals so that they are able to pass, or remain undetected. This visual metaphor of the need for people to adopt different guises in daily interactions with people will be noted by students who are learning how to navigate in a new society. Indeed, as ELLs learn to “juxtapose different languages, discourses, styles, and approaches, they gain substantively in meta-cognitive and meta-linguistic abilities and in their ability to reflect critically on complex systems and their interactions” (New London Group, 1996, p. 69). *Maus* is thus an excellent example for ELL students of how people use different registers for different occasions, which in the particular case of *Maus* may well determine one’s fate.

Maus also incorporates the second aspect of multiliteracies outlined by the New London Group (1996) in its “visual images and their relationship to the written word” (p. 61). This multimodal text features maps, photographs, detailed drawings, and a comic book short story within the graphic novel, all of which “engage identities and the imagination in provocative ways unmet through other textual resources” (Morgan & Ramanathan, 2005, p. 158). Through

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these multimodal representations, the attention of the reader is also drawn to the very materiality of the graphic novel itself in ways that shape understandings of the narrative (Hatfield, 2005). Because the dominance of the visual is characteristic of communication in many public domains (Kress, 2000), students need to develop a critical attentiveness toward how visual images are constructed with the aim of influencing and manipulating consumers of such images.

Maus can easily be incorporated into a lesson plan for the ESL classroom that includes a Readers Theatre in which teachers can read aloud from the written text while playing the roles of Vladek, Anja, Artie, and the numerous other characters. To help students interact with the text, teachers can photocopy selected pages from the book for students to insert their own comments on what is happening in the story, the language the characters use, the grammatical forms used, etc. These comments can easily be written in the blank margins that frame the panels in the graphic novel. Students' comments can take the form of balloons drawn alongside the dialogue balloons in the book. In this way, students can feel they are engaging in a dialogue directly with the author or the characters.

Thanks to recent computer software with numerous templates and designs, students can easily create and design their own graphic novels on school computers. Possibilities include creating dual language or multiple language identity texts in the form of a graphic novel of students' own design. These novels can tell the stories of students' parents or grandparents in their home countries and in their new country: their struggles in leaving or perhaps their tribulations in facing discrimination and prejudice in a new society. This activity of narrative storytelling in students' graphic novels would be one way to teach ELLs how to use correct verb tenses to mark the chronological events in their lives.

Students are increasingly oriented toward information delivered through online media. Creating

lessons that integrate the multiliteracies activities of fostering reading engagement in graphic novels with designs of meaning making can more fully involve learners who may be resistant to traditional literacy activities. By giving them the tools to engage in their own means of multimodal production, students can become more than just passive receivers of knowledge; they can transform themselves into active producers of knowledge.

Teaching Maus: A Report From the Field

The following relates a collaborated pilot study of one teacher's experiences in teaching *Maus* to her urban secondary school ESL class. As an ESL instructor for 16 years, I was a colleague of the teacher, Martha, for 5 years. Together, we designed the class lessons for teaching *Maus*. Martha's advanced level class comprised ELL students from grades 9 to 12, and many were immigrants from countries in Central America. Before plunging into the book with her class, she first surveyed the students on their literacy activities outside of school. When asked how many books were in their homes, the overwhelming majority of students responded that their homes had only the school textbooks they were currently using for classes. Most also reported that they never read books for pleasure, while the rest read for pleasure sometimes. Outside of school, many students only read the following:

- monthly bills to help pay them
- mail and flyers
- English subtitles while watching movies in English
- downloaded lyrics to favorite songs
- messages via texting and instant messaging
- websites such as MySpace (only one had heard of Facebook)

Approximately 20%–25% of the class said they occasionally read newspapers, and about the same number of students read comic books.

Teaching *Maus* to this particular ESL class necessitated a lot of scaffolding and contextualizing: many of the students did not know anything about World War II, the Holocaust, or Judaism; idioms and vocabulary had to be highlighted first; and significantly,

more than a few had never seen or read a comic book before. Martha had to show these students how to read the graphic novel *visually*, so that the students would be able to follow the sequential but nonlinear paneling of the story. Because “visual images are socially and culturally constructed products which have a culturally specific grammar of their own” (Stenglin & Iedema, 2001, p. 194), the students who had never been exposed to the specific visual grammar of a graphic novel had to adjust to it. However, once they did, they had little trouble incorporating their own resources of visual literacies (for some, gained from video and online gaming) to help them understand the complex visual metaphors of *Maus* that further the plot (such as Anja’s inadvertently exposed tail that gives her away as a Jew) and highlight the sinister (the path on which the couple are walking takes the shape of a swastika).

Despite the fact that it is still hard to get Martha’s students to read independently on their own, and that reading instruction with *Maus* is the same struggle as with other texts, she reports that the students’ enthusiasm for this graphic novel has been enormous. The novelty of reading a graphic novel in the classroom, its unique modality of visual puns and metaphors, and its compelling narrative all combined to increase the students’ level of reading engagement. *Maus* has generated a lot of questions and curiosity about history from the students where none had existed before. Through critical mediation of this text they understand historical concepts in sophisticated ways: “a lot of learning is going on” (M. Atwell, personal communication, July 18, 2008). This demonstrates how mediated multimodal strategies in the critical literacy tool kit engender learner engagement.

Martha’s students clamored for her to read *Maus* aloud to them as they followed the text; as soon as she stopped they pleaded for her to continue. This confirms Ivey’s (1999) observation that reading aloud is “a powerful practice for promoting literacy appreciation and development” and shows “reading is pleasurable and worthwhile” (p. 375). This also has been helpful when the students first ran across the various sound effects that are featured in this graphic novel: the utterances of *ach*, *snrk*, *snf*, and *tsk* all came alive for the students upon hearing Martha vocalizing them.

The teacher read-alouds also highlighted the nonstandard English used by Vladek. These advanced level ELL students immediately recognized this nonstandard usage, either upon hearing or reading it. This led to a class discussion on language use and the notions of standard versus nonstandard language. Although they were amazed that one could actually write broken English in a (graphic) novel, the students also knew from firsthand knowledge that this representation was true to reality: several observed “that’s how he really talks.”

Indeed, seeing this affirmation of diverse ways of speaking in print cannot help but resonate with ELL students’ identities when they may be positioned in schools as others. Reading about Art Spiegelman’s quest to know more about his family’s history in detail, several students now want to find out about their parents’ previous life experiences—which confirms one aim of the critical literacy tool kit; that of the use of personal stories to connect the personal with power relations in society. Every student identified with the smuggling scene in *Maus*; many related it to their own experiences crossing the border via coyotes—paid smugglers.

Teaching *Maus* has had a positive impact on these students’ literacy learning. They have told Martha that this is the first time they have been “turned on” by history. At the time of this writing, her students are fully immersed in the story and will probably finish it on their own. Martha reports that all the students now want their own copy of *Maus*. She hopes this will lead to their reading more graphic novels on their own. They also now have the background from reading *Maus* to continue reading other books on the Holocaust—in fact, Martha plans to have them read about Anne Frank next. Afterward, she will have the students write an essay on how different genres deliver the story of the Holocaust. This will be their introduction to literary analysis. The students’ final project will be to recount their own family narratives using multimodal representations of text, images, and sound aided by computer software.

For those ELL students who already read graphic novels on their own (usually in the library because they are expensive to buy), this practice enables them to meet and interact with native speakers who are avid

graphic novel readers. For those who now know an important graphic novel, this may gain them entry into this social network that transcends ethnic and linguistic divides. Claiming membership in a community defined by love of these novels can help facilitate the transition of ELL students into mainstream classes.

Compelling Narratives Aid Students in Reading the Word and the World

Texts that are connected to “real and imagined material and social worlds” (Gee, 2001, p. 716) include the type that many readers have always found appealing: powerfully engaging narratives. Engaging with a compelling narrative is what Morrison (1994) called “radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created” (p. 27). Readers can thus be transformed by their encounters with a story in ways that can alter habits of thinking or living. Consequently, a narrative in the form of a graphic novel can potentially influence students’ lives. Reading these powerful narratives gives students a sense of ownership over these texts through their intellectual and emotional engagement with them.

A multiliteracies pedagogy fosters students’ critical awareness of multimodal texts by using students’ own resources. The development of literacy and critical literacy need not be independent of each other; in fact, they are mutually constitutive in a classroom that emphasizes the need to read the world in which we live. Wide reading of high-interest stories aids literacy development, and a critical literacy approach to these stories on substantive topics also deepens students’ engagement by connecting these stories to students’ own experiences. This can encourage critical reflection, which in turn leads to students’ acknowledging their own power as co-creators of knowledge in the classroom and beyond.

Using a graphic novel like *Maus* in the classroom to teach how language works both for and against people can enable students to acquire the necessary critical literacy that will, as Freire and Macedo (1987) affirmed, aid them in the important tasks of reading both the world and the word.

Notes

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*To use the strategies described in this article in your classroom, see “Making It Visual for ELL Students: Teaching History Using *Maus*” on ReadWriteThink.org. The lesson offers step-by-step directions for how to incorporate the graphic novel *Maus* in your instruction on the Holocaust and includes student printouts for classroom use.*

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